



# Picturing the catastrophe. News photographs in the first weeks after Katrina

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Picturing the catastrophe. News photographs in the first weeks after Katrina.

Catastrophe: 1. The final event of the dramatic action, esp. of a tragedy. 2. a momentous tragic event ranging from extreme misfortune to utter overthrow or ruin. 3. a violent and sudden change in a feature of the earth. 4. utter failure.  
(*Webster's Dictionary*)

As all contemporary events, Hurricane Katrina was also a news event in which images – and particularly still images – played a defining role. The narratives constructed around the events work as a system of explanations be they mythological, biblical or sociological. First among them, the paradigm of the nomination of the occurrence itself (catastrophe, tragedy, etc.) immediately propose a set of definitions which attempt to domesticate and make sense of that which makes no sense, by placing the idiosyncratic nature of the event in a known paradigm. Photographs are one of the major elements of characterization.

This is why the choice was made to concentrate on how Hurricane Katrina was visually reported in still photographs published in a few selected newsmedia.<sup>1</sup> The overarching hypothesis is that the way Katrina was constructed through images for national and international audiences as well as for future memory bears a striking resemblance with other natural or man-made catastrophies. My contention is that the codes of representation at work in this event were elaborated almost eighty years ago both by photographers and picture editors. For all intents and purposes images of Katrina in the print media – the case of the internet is much fuzzier – were in no way different from how the *Ur* catastrophe of American culture in the 20th century, the Great Depression was portrayed in picture magazines and syndicated newspaper pages of the time. This should not come as a surprise. It evidences the permanence of a very few deep rhetorical visual figures in the perception of space since at least the modernist period. For all intents and purposes – and despite major changes in communication with the advent of television and digital media – our visual world and consequently our perception of events has remained remarkably stable. One can even witness the return of the still image in the public sphere since the early 2000s after decades of prominence of television which had ousted the “old photographic media” (leading in particular to the disappearance of illustrated magazines). This took place, I contend, around

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise specified all the websites were accessed between Aug 1 and Aug 15, 2010.

9/11, as this local/global event met the development of amateur digital photography coupled with the internet.<sup>2</sup>

Of course, the proposition could be reversed. The continuity may be first and foremost political – and not visual –, ie that ever since the 1930s, information providers and “shapers” (journalists and editors) in all liberal democracies have merely reinforced the dominant ideology of social engineering. Whatever the causal relationship, however, there is a true historical continuity in the public sphere, among other things in the belief in showing (rather than telling) and particularly in showing through photographs.<sup>3</sup>

### The ambiguous image of Katrina

Despite the difference in the particulars, the visual rendering of Katrina, both of the hurricane and the flood, bears striking resemblance with previous instances of such catastrophes, thus showing this continuity in the place we assign to their visual rendering and more broadly to the function of photographs in contemporary society. Yet the event itself was rather un-exceptional in American history if seen in a broad perspective. Nature – its magnificence but also its vagaries – is central to American thinking for reasons which are both historical and geographical. The awe it creates – from giant trees or geysers to tornadoes and hurricanes – blended with the romantic sensibility as well as the more pragmatic, positive, achiever, can-do mentality which became a landmark of the famous “pioneer spirit” and is part and parcel of the American experience. The sheer violence of natural phenomena in a country the size of a continent cumulating heavily seismic zones and tropical areas (without forgetting the northern blizzards zones), the very direct and recent experience of “taming” the climate (of which air conditioning is but one of the latest and most striking manifestations), all these structured the American psyche. Many Americans live in danger zones, risking instant annihilation, from the Florida Keys to California, and they know it. This land is their land, however, and it is as if Americans drew a particular if paradoxical pride – and even a form of identity – from this situation which perpetual challenges their power to remold the land and shape it for their exclusive use – a triumph of will over matter – as a birthright handed directly from Genesis. What is at stake is not so much “making do with nature” as “bending it to man’s use” as the ultimate gauge of success, and thus of true humanity. The history of the conquest of the territory is fraught with such instances. Reading “natural disasters” images cannot be done without bearing in

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<sup>2</sup> This return might be the true revolution ushered by 9/11 which was staged as a media event, but turned out to be less a video moment than a photographic one. See the landmark exhibition “Here is New York” which opened in SoHo almost immediately after the event, in September 2001 (<http://hereisnewyork.org>). Another similar exhibit was shown two years later in Lausanne (Musée de l’Elysée), “New York après New York. Mémoire d’une ville blessée” (June 13-Sept 16, 2002, <http://www.elysee.ch/fr/expositions/detail/article/new-york-apres-new-york/>).

<sup>3</sup> Kendall L. Walton, “Transparent Pictures: On the Nature of Photographic Realism,” *Critical Inquiry* 11, n° 2 (Décembre 1984): 246-277.

mind that natural disasters are part of American cultural history as natural challenges.

Katrina must thus be seen in a long series of catastrophies. One can mention the San Francisco earthquake photographed by Arnold Genthe whose images were largely publicized, the Galveston hurricane of 1900, the great Mississippi floods of 1927, the Tri-State tornado of 1925, the great New England hurricane of 1938 which hit a part of the country not used to such damage, the great blizzard of 1993, etc. In a close category come the two terrorist attacks of Oklahoma city in 1995 and of the Twin towers in 2001 which became true global events. "Katrina," however, immediately became a catastrophic flood and not simply a giant hurricane ; and the fact that floods have had a specific place in human mythologies – many cosmologies begin with one – gave it a special place in imagination.

Yet, perhaps the most comparable domestic event was the Great Depression, not only because of its magnitude but because images played a central part in depicting the economic crisis as a *natural* catastrophe and deeply shaped the iconography of victims. Much of the New Deal message on recovery was also predicated on the innocence of the affected populations.<sup>4</sup>

For late 20th-21st century audiences, however, the largest source of traumatic visual references is not to be found domestically but abroad in disasters such as floods, landslides, explosions, etc., and wars taking place overseas and, most importantly, affecting non-white populations. This made the "normal" victims of a catastrophe non-Americans and non-white, a fact which deeply shaped the perception of Katrina. The resulting effect was the transformation of a part of the American territory into what was akin to a war zone, and thus of the Third world as the prevailing media image of war is that of violence happening in poor "foreign countries." New Orleans was thus actually caught up in its very image: the city which has an exotic flavor in American culture, is a little of the Caribbean culture on American soil – and is marketed as such – actually was made a real third world city by Katrina and thus severed from the main land as it were.

### Making pictures is a commitment

All the first images and many of the most striking ones were made by local newsphotographers who were themselves hit by the catastrophe in their own lives. They kept working despite the immediate danger to themselves and their families. In other words, they were victims themselves.<sup>5</sup> Trapped in the office of the

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<sup>4</sup> See Jean Kempf, "L'Œuvre photographique de la 'Farm Security Administration'. Quelques questions de rapport entre photographie et société," PhD Diss, Université Lumière-Lyon 2, 1988 ([http://theses.univ-lyon2.fr/documents/lyon2/1988/kempf\\_j](http://theses.univ-lyon2.fr/documents/lyon2/1988/kempf_j)), Maren Stange, *Symbols of Ideal Life: Social Documentary Photography in America, 1890-1950* (Cambridge [England]: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Michele L. Landis, "Fate, Responsibility, and 'Natural' Disaster Relief: Narrating the American Welfare State," *Law & Society Review* 33, n°. 2 (1999): 257-318.

<sup>5</sup> [http://digitaljournalist.org/issue0512/jackson\\_intro.html](http://digitaljournalist.org/issue0512/jackson_intro.html). Two documents help us understand the conditions in which the photographers worked in New Orleans on the first days of the hurricane and when the levees broke : Marianne Fulton, "UT Katrina Coverage, Digital Photographer," with

*Times-Picayune*, or busy with the jobs to be done and with little means of communication, the local journalists were often without news from their families: "You're not covering a story, you're covering your life" says one.<sup>6</sup> After a while they were also the target of man-to-man violence, either because of the tension in the stranded population, or directly of looters after their expensive equipment. *Digital Journalist* aptly called Ted Jackson's photo gallery "The ordeal of Ted Jackson." In a lengthy video interview recorded in December 2005, Jackson tells about his very first days in the city, right after the levees broke. After the second day out on his own, he felt: "I'm aching, I'm hurting."<sup>7</sup> Then Jackson met a national reporter who told him: "I covered the tsunami. This is much worse." Jackson is then at pains (or ashamed) to interpret the true meaning of the statement and simply says that the journalist must have meant something different as there were many more deaths in Indonesia. However, the meaning of the sentence is rather transparent to a more dispassionate observer: he clearly meant "these are *our* people, it should not be happening."

Also, the total disorganization of communications made the reporters in the field – and probably many of the volunteer rescuers as well – into free agents relying on their own feelings, knowledge, and capacity to make decisions and to band together for greater safety.<sup>8</sup> For them, this moment also marked a truly liberating experience from the highly formatted practice of journalism in the days of instant communication, and allowed them to experience again some of the imagined (or real) freedom of the great mythical figures of the 1930s-50s, the

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statements by Sloan Breeden, Mark Mulligan, Anne Drabicky, Meg Loucks, Rob Strong, and Ben Sklar ([http://digitaljournalist.org/issue0510/dis\\_reed.html](http://digitaljournalist.org/issue0510/dis_reed.html)). Eli Reed, "Photojournalism Students Cover Hurricane Katrina in Their First Leap Into a Real-World Crisis," (<http://www.nieman.harvard.edu/reportsitem.aspx?id=100611>). Those are *expostfacto* testimonies of seasoned professionals and young aspiring journalists. Necessary caution must be exercised towards those heavily edited testimonies, collected by fellow journalists and to some extent participating in an "operation of justification." The very collection and exhibition of the testimonies of the photographers themselves, however, is significant enough to make us realize the import of the act of taking the pictures in such situation, at least of the *mental representations* of the act. However, all the conclusions of this chapter as to the specific relation of the local professional photographers to their subject were confirmed by personal interviews conducted with one of the photographers, John McCusker (Lyon, 30-31 mars 2011). Those are congruent with other testimonies of war and documentary photographers and evidences the existence of a common shaping force in dramatic events for journalistic witnesses, and the existence of a common professional culture among them.

<sup>6</sup> [http://digitaljournalist.org/issue0512/jackson\\_intro.html](http://digitaljournalist.org/issue0512/jackson_intro.html). Also [http://digitaljournalist.org/issue0512/jackson\\_video.html](http://digitaljournalist.org/issue0512/jackson_video.html), part 3 : "I've seen disaster before. It's always around the world. It's not in my backyard."

<sup>7</sup> [http://digitaljournalist.org/issue0512/jackson\\_video.html](http://digitaljournalist.org/issue0512/jackson_video.html). The fact that Ted Jackson is a devout Christian ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ted\\_Jackson](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ted_Jackson)) certainly influenced his ethics and perspective and must be taken into account when analyzing the tale of his "ordeal".

<sup>8</sup> See David Eggers' excellent narrative *Zeitoun* (2009) for similar accounts of the first day rescues.

documentarians and war reporters who shaped the field.<sup>9</sup> In other words they regained “agency” even though sometimes only in fantasy. The price to pay was of course possible physical injuries and psychological trauma as well as several health hazards from the heavily polluted environment.<sup>10</sup>

Photographers describe their total involvement in the cause of reporting as a commitment to the community, giving real meaning to their ordinary run-of-the-mill jobs in words that make them soldiers of information but soldiers who would paradoxically only obey their own conscience. Their language is characteristic of such position, in particular when they tell us that the people felt relieved by their presence. Ted Jackson describes the “mobs” at the Convention Center, shouting: “It’s the media, they’re here to tell our story!”, and then Angela Perkins falling to her knees and shouting: “Help us, please”, her picture making it to the next morning’s frontpages<sup>11</sup> As Jackson summarizes in the Christian parlance he uses: “She [Angela Perkins] was praying through our lenses.”<sup>12</sup> Clearly in these moments, with their own personal and sometimes painful issues (some suffered breakdowns and a few marriages collapsed) and despite their differences, the individual photographers became the embodiment of a whole profession. In so doing, they transformed their contingent individual selves into emblems, which is exactly what they do in their photographs: after all, this is the meaning of the word “representation”.

More prosaically, this exceptional event was also a chance of breaking into the national or even international news market, make a name for oneself, and possibly “make a difference”: “Actually covering something important, instead, and knowing that the pictures could convey something that words couldn’t. And the ultimate privilege of seeing something firsthand that will change your life.”<sup>13</sup> The overarching message is no different from that of those young men and women photographers hired by Roy Stryker in the 1930s and who experienced their mission as an extraordinary education.<sup>14</sup> The Katrina photographers, most of them with only local experience, probably weaned on tales of war photographers, got a chance of experiencing something close to working in a combat zone,<sup>15</sup> and akin to real adventure – a term used several times in the accounts – as veteran photojournalist Bill Pierce expresses it: “They are going to get an education that

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<sup>9</sup> Ted Jackson tells in the video interview op.cit the very momentous instants when he made up his mind not to follow the TP staff evacuating to Baton-Rouge to safety.

<sup>10</sup> Bill Pierce, <http://digitaljournalist.org/issue0509/pierce.html>

<sup>11</sup> Interview, part 3.

<sup>12</sup> Interview, part 3.

<sup>13</sup> Bill Pierce, <http://digitaljournalist.org/issue0509/pierce.html>

<sup>14</sup> See Kempf, “L’Œuvre photographique de la ‘Farm Security Administration’.”

<sup>15</sup> A US Army general declared that the hurricane was “like a well planned attack” (TP, Sept 14, p.10) This phrase points at the running simile which undoubtedly served as justification for the use of the military in defense and not simply humanitarian duty. It also made the photographers not simply “civilian reporters” but let them compare themselves to the highest class of journalist in the romantic (and prestige) scale the war correspondent.

will change them forever.”<sup>16</sup> The photographers, either junior or senior, did know that in all senses of the world this was “the big one” as attested by the first *Times-Picayune* headline calling Super Dome “Ground Zero”, or Smiley N. Poole of the *Dallas Morning News* explicitly referring to his sense of place in the history of photography while shooting pictures from a helicopter.<sup>17</sup> Donald Winslow, the editor of *News Photographer Magazine*, sums it up most forcefully in the October issue of the magazine (reprinted in *Digital Photographer*<sup>18</sup>):

Photojournalism has been called upon once again to assume its proper role in the examination of tragedy, politics, and race in America. It is a story of magnitude equal to the saga of the Dust Bowl of the 1930s and the civil rights movement of the 1960s, and our call to action has just been delivered to us via a hurricane, handed to us on the world’s front pages. This is the story of our era, of our present and of our future. It’s time now for photojournalists and their editors to start doing something long-term, and something of significance, about it.

This liberal plea for photojournalism is one more instance of the classic statement of the power of the image in righting society’s wrongs:

But the pictures in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina flooded that reality onto the world’s front pages and now everyone sees it, the whole world sees it, and it can no longer be ignored. The photographs are indisputable, showing the truth about human behavior at its best and at its worst, exhibiting the physical evidence of institutional and policy failure, and writing history’s first draft of the nasty results of America’s economic, political, and cultural racism.

The most important lesson was their being faced with the fundamental journalistic question of choosing between being a witness or a player. The *Times-Picayune* photographers, as well as others, repeatedly tell that given the extent of the flood and the limited number of rescuers they had to choose between rescuing people or taking their pictures. They tried, it seems, to mitigate the two, and often the documents tell us that the issue was positive for the people concerned:

There were times when Jackson said he just couldn’t shoot a picture, or was distressed about doing so, such as the morning after the worst of Katrina’s fury had passed, but before the levees broke. Most of the staff, some with their families, had spent the night of the storm in the relative safety of the *Picayune* offices. When day broke,

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<sup>16</sup> For “adventure” see for instance, Ted Jackson : “the nutty part of this business [journalism] [is that] when everybody is getting out, you’re running in.” (part 3). Bill Pierce, <http://digitaljournalist.org/issue0509/pierce.html>

<sup>17</sup> [http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/14484343/ns/news-picture\\_stories/displaymode/1107/s/2/](http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/14484343/ns/news-picture_stories/displaymode/1107/s/2/), image #4 and attached soundtrack.

<sup>18</sup> <http://digitaljournalist.org/issue0511/winslow.html>.

he went out in his truck to photograph the customary aftermath of what he thought was just another normal hurricane. Arriving on the bridge above St. Claude Avenue and discovering the road below flooding from the storm itself, Jackson found himself powerless to rescue several women and their children, trapped and clinging to the rails on their front porch. Partially submerged by the rushing, rising waters, they desperately beseeched him for help. There was no possible way to get to them across the road just 50 feet away without being swept away himself. Amid much anguish, he did shoot a few frames, but the images left in his mind for two months were perhaps more haunting than the photographs he did take. Realizing he could not deliver them from their peril, and understanding the power of hope, he called out to them to stay where they were, reassuring them that help would come. [...]

He told us he'd returned with a boat and a rope looking for the women and children, only to find them gone. Down the street, a man and his family were in the process of being rescued. Jackson told him he was glad he had gotten out, reminding him that he had been the one shooting photos as he saw him calling out from his attic window for help. But when asked, the man did not know what had happened to his neighbors. When we visited the scene on October 12, the fate of the women and children at 4702 St. Claude Avenue was still unknown. However, with the help of a writer in the Picayune's Living Department, Jackson has since discovered they were indeed rescued and evacuated to Houston, where they remain. Such was a happy resolution to one of many situations wrought by the disaster, but other times were even more difficult and without resolve. Jackson says after the levees broke the next day he found himself in circumstances where he put his camera down, being the only one on the scene. He decided that if he couldn't help them, he couldn't shoot their photo, and seems very clear about the times when he drew that line – when the best and most decent choice of a given moment was not to shoot.<sup>19</sup>

In a direct testimony, the photographer raises other similar moral issues when he describes the complete anarchy which took hold of New Orleans in the first two days: anything went, whatever you needed you just took, a situation that he feels was both exhilarating (the complete lifting of all society's prohibitions) and scary (the end of one status as a protected individual, a white man and a journalist). It was an opportunity – a moral testing ground as it were – to test the limit between justifiable seizure of property ("commandeering") and looting – a case he

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<sup>19</sup> [http://digitaljournalist.org/issue0512/jackson\\_intro.html](http://digitaljournalist.org/issue0512/jackson_intro.html). Ted Jackson also explains in his video interview his line of conduct as to using his boat for rescue, a moral decision that he compares to the sinking of the *Titanic* and the use of life boats.



experienced himself after getting a flat tyre and being tempted to take a brand new tyre from a car instead of the spare tyre of his own – and which here serves as metaphor for the larger ethics of reporting, the honesty which is the foundation of any reliable information for a democratic society.

More than the story itself, it is the tone of the tales told by fellow journalists meeting with the photographers who operated in New Orleans during the worst part of the crisis which is significant. It is also the lengthy personal captions appended to many images available on numerous sites (*Digital Photographer*, MSNBC among others) and narrating the experience surrounding the taking of the image, the interaction with the photographer and not just data on the subject as is usually the norm. Adventure, everyday humanism, cool, calm and collection, and eventually honesty (truthfulness) as befits true heroes of the communication age.

### Framing the scene, creating a spectacle

The photographers were examined first because the power of the photographic image rests on the photographer's word: if the belief in the truth-producing power of the mechanical image is now long gone, the validation attached to the "sources" is still one of the main truth test for photos. Showing a photograph still remains an act of truth-telling predicated on the double fact that someone (the photographer) was there, that this someone did not fundamentally alter or distort the "moment" by his selection, and that no such process took place in the editing chain.<sup>20</sup> The literature on doctored images, or simply on "misleading images," is large and digital technology has only increased the possibilities of manipulation. These developments have placed even greater responsibility on the publication chain, thereby reinforcing the necessity for the trustworthiness of its very first link, the photographer.

Selection is obviously central to any information process: selection is editorial, and operates within the context of limited publication space. In the case of Katrina, and generally of contemporary events, it is somewhat counterbalanced by the dissemination of images through the web. There remains, however, to measure and understand the impact of such dissemination beyond a limited specialized or particularly concerned audience, such as the victims or the locals in the case of Katrina. It seems that it is still the images published in the traditional media that by and large shape the portrayal of the event.

The first step, however, is the shaping of the scene by the photographers themselves. The photographers' reactions to the scene are conditioned by three factors: cultural background/training, technology, and access.

Access is one of the often disregarded and yet paramount condition of visibility. In the context of war it is often discussed, in legal/political terms. Yet physical access and the impediments to it are just about as important. In the case of Katrina, certain parts of the city such as the Lower Ninth Ward and around the

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<sup>20</sup> See Miles Orvell, *The Real Thing: Imitation and Authenticity in American Culture, 1880-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989).

bridges on Claude and Claiborne Avenues were easier to reach than others, and certain places concentrated a large number of people (the Super Dome in particular), making them choice sites for images. Visual evidence is thus more the result of access than of real statistical evidence, although the two are not necessarily opposite. Similarly, aerial views – a classic of flood images – although dependent on the availability of air transport for journalists, are not only used because of their telling function, but also as a direct result of access problem to disaster zones.

Then comes rhetoric: in order to be “catchy” – with the mantra of all photo-journalism – a picture must not only show things (telling the story differentiate art and journalism) but also encode them within a context of visual references. In other words, pictures need to be constructed according to certain visual principles designed to capture the viewer’s attention: contrast, opposition, composition. Their simplicity and repetitiveness produce a remarkable stability in the treatment of shock scenes in press photos.

Technology has allowed considerable progress in the implementation of old formulas, realizing the dream that was inaccessible to previous generations: zoom lenses going from very wide angles to very long telephotos on the one hand, the sensitivity of captors allowing most pictures to be taken without flash even in low level lighting, on the other. Scenes thus appear to be more natural and less intrusive than similar scenes by their predecessors, such documentarians as Riis, Hine, FSA or Weegee, and the chiaroscuro effect easily associates these images with high art. Not surprisingly the corpus of images made by aspiring photographers from University of Texas school of journalism is more heavily marked by “artsy” compositions and lighting, often preferring the pictorial reference to the explicit narrative form, a fact reinforced by the presentation of some of their images in black-and-white.<sup>21</sup> Many of the frames in this “junior” series are askance, evidencing a constructivist aesthetic emphasizing the formal visual composition. In the massive output of professional images on Katrina<sup>22</sup> “medium range” shots are rare; 80% of the photos are either wide-angle shots or long range shots as increase the narrative power of the image.

The long range shots allow abstraction by selection of a small part of a scene (often the expression of a face) and by depth of field (blurring all the other planes to focus on the most important one). They work as close-ups do. A part of the body for instance is more efficient in the tale than a whole person’s photograph. The old woman’s hands in the Midwest by Russell Lee or the sharecropper’s boots by Walker Evans have become a case in point in the history of photographic

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<sup>21</sup> <http://www.nieman.harvard.edu/reportsitem.aspx?id=100611>,  
<http://digitaljournalist.org/issue0510/video-utkatrina.html>, <http://www.bensklar.com/katrina.html>

<sup>22</sup> For amateurs shots see Flickr!’s Katrina gallery,  
<http://www.flickr.com/groups/45871688@N00/pool/>. They will not be discussed in this paper, but were used as a sort of test against which to look at professional images.

rhetoric.<sup>23</sup> The photographic image is first and foremost a focusing object based on selection. In photographs, the detail is more than itself: it becomes a metonymy.<sup>24</sup> In the case of Katrina, the shot of a man's feet wearing makeshift shoes reading "Keep moving" combines many of those qualities of a powerful documentary/news icon [Picture 1].<sup>25</sup> On the other hand, the wide angle lens brings a subject in the foreground against the background of the scene, thus producing at the same time contextualization and dramatization. It is used to describe the chaos resulting from the hurricane/flood, expressed by the surrealistic superposition of everyday objects (in a broken or tumbled state) relocated in unusual/absurd or especially pathetic locations [Picture 2]. These shots construct the classical visual metaphor of the dislocation of lives which were established in the 1930s by such diverse photographic movements as the Russian constructivists, the German *Neue Sachlichkeit*, and the American Farm Security Administration.<sup>26</sup> Despite their sad message, these images make the viewer experience the evil "beauty" of such chance meetings, and the terrible power of nature, in other words the sublime.<sup>27</sup>

The last figure is the aerial shots.<sup>28</sup> Aerial shots are classics of the floods, even of the early ones, such as the 1927 Mississippi flood. They are obviously made easier by the use of helicopters riding photographers on their rescue operations. Although not very numerous in the Katrina files I consulted, they were published by all media as Katrina contrary to 9/11 was a horizontal event and a rather slower one.<sup>29</sup> Visually they show Katrina making formerly well-known places unrecognizable – roads efficiently play this role<sup>30</sup> – completely remodelling the

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<sup>23</sup> Russell Lee, "The hands of Mrs. Andrew Ostermeyer, wife of a homesteader, Woodbury County, Iowa," 1936, Library of Congress; Walker Evans, *Floyd Burrough's Working Shoes*, Alabama, 1936 (published in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*).

<sup>24</sup> As such it has revolutionized our apprehension of the world from news to art (the effect of the detail in the perception of art was theorized by Walter Benjamin and used by André Malraux in his famous *Imaginary Museum* (André Malraux, *Museum Without Walls*, London: Secker & Warburg, 1967).

<sup>25</sup> [http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/14484343/ns/news-picture\\_stories/displaymode/1107/s/2/, image #5](http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/14484343/ns/news-picture_stories/displaymode/1107/s/2/, image #5).

<sup>26</sup> For the latter, see the famous Dorothea Lange, *Migrant Mother* or Arthur Rothstein, *Human Erosion* or even Russell Lee, "An organ deposited by the flood on a farm near Mount Vernon," Indiana, 1937 (Library of Congress).

<sup>27</sup> The surrealistic meeting of a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissecting table ["...beau comme [...] la rencontre fortuite sur une table de dissection d'une machine à coudre et d'un parapluie !" Lautreamont, *Les Chants de Maldoror*, chant 6 (1869)]

<sup>28</sup> I am dealing here only with the "low" aerial shots made from helicopters, not the high-altitude shots made by NOAA (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration) (visible at [http://www.katrinadestruction.com/images/v/noaa\\_overhead\\_gulf\\_coast\\_aerial\\_images/](http://www.katrinadestruction.com/images/v/noaa_overhead_gulf_coast_aerial_images/)) one of which was published in the *Times-Picayune* of September 1st, nor with NASA space shots of the hurricane dealt with in the section below devoted to "scientific representation".

<sup>29</sup> See <http://www.katrinadestruction.com/images/v/new+orleans+flood/>

<sup>30</sup> See TP, Sept 2, p.13.

<http://www.katrinadestruction.com/images/v/new+orleans+flood/SIP0517774-new-orleans-aerial.html>,

<http://www.katrinadestruction.com/images/v/new+orleans+flood/aerial+flooding+images.html>,

landscape and turning New Orleans into a sort of sinking ship or Venice of the Gulf.<sup>31</sup> Eventually aerial shots turn the city into painterly abstractions.<sup>32</sup> This is particularly true of one shot published in *Time* which cuts out the horizon, dislocates the scene geographically and makes it into a pattern of abstract objects which slowly appear to the viewer as being roofs [Picture 3]. Beyond its journalistic meaning (only accessible to locals or through detailed explanation of the evacuation procedures) a flooded parking lot full of schoolbuses provides both the pleasurable rhythm of repetition of the famous yellow boxes and the sadness of the drowning of an icon.<sup>33</sup> If the destructive force of the hurricane could be compared in visual effects to that of the 9/11 attack which decapitated a statue in a holocaust of fire and made the two "columns" (or pillars of capitalism) tumble down in ashes ("from ashes to ashes, from dust to dust") providing an instant spectacle to be repeated *ad lib* on television, or to that of the earthquakes wiping out buildings, the flood itself – which was the real Katrina disaster – was an essentially static event. Yet, from this static event, photographers constructed a spectacle. We must therefore now turn to the figures of this spectacle.

#### The rhetoric of disaster

Images of Katrina – and in fact of most disasters – can be roughly divided into three different categories: statements (what the hurricane and the flood did), action (rescuing and taking over from nature), knowledge (explaining the causes and the effects and preparing the aftermath). Though the published volume of images in each category changed through time and differed according to publications, the rhetorical figures remained stable.

#### Effects

Catastrophies – whether lethal or not – are most often described by the traces they leave, to make the viewers understand the nature of the event through metonymic reasoning/perception thus displacing the focus from the event itself – to the victims. A disaster/catastrophe is first and foremost defined by its victims.

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[http://www.katrinadestruction.com/images/v/hurricane/Search+and+Rescue\\_001.html](http://www.katrinadestruction.com/images/v/hurricane/Search+and+Rescue_001.html),  
[http://www.katrinadestruction.com/images/v/hurricane/apuscg\\_050829C3550N\\_05BV4.jpg.html](http://www.katrinadestruction.com/images/v/hurricane/apuscg_050829C3550N_05BV4.jpg.html),  
<http://www.katrinadestruction.com/images/v/hurricane/massive+new+orleans+flooding.html>

<sup>31</sup> *Newsweek*, September 12, 2005, pp.18-19; the French magazine *Paris-Match* wrote: "New Orleans is sinking" (September 8-14).

<sup>32</sup> In the case of the Haiti earthquake aerial shots were hardly used by the press first because they were rare (the air space being closed) and then because readers not knowing Haiti the effect of those shots were lost on them. The only ones I was able to locate are [http://www.boston.com/bigpicture/2010/01/haiti\\_48\\_hours\\_later.html#photo6](http://www.boston.com/bigpicture/2010/01/haiti_48_hours_later.html#photo6) and [http://www.boston.com/bigpicture/2010/01/haiti\\_48\\_hours\\_later.html#photo7](http://www.boston.com/bigpicture/2010/01/haiti_48_hours_later.html#photo7). They are in fact aerial closeups playing on the contrast between the destroyed building and their flimsiness dans showing refuges camps, colored tents against the grey roofs. They cannot be considered "landscapes" which did not make sense to international viewers.

<sup>33</sup> <http://www.katrinadestruction.com/images/v/hurricane/swamped+school+buses.html>,  
<http://www.katrinadestruction.com/images/v/hurricane/15021w.jpg.html>

Chronologically this was the first and the longer-lasting theme, and can be characterized by three types of images : the effect on objects, the effect on bodies, and the effect on homes.

The traces on objects is first and foremost the displacement and the surrealistic conjunction of objects, when the flotsam jetsam comes to be seen. This is exemplified in the feature section of the *Times-Picayune* of Sept 15, p.12, called "Left behind" which chronicles a series of abandoned objects as pathetic traces of the flight, but also of lives lost.<sup>34</sup> It is the "3-little-pigs" effect with houses literally blown away as straw, warped iron structures, trucks ending up in trees and boats on highways (*Times-Picayune*, Sept 11, p.4). *National Geographic* in its August 2006 edition even offered an anniversary panoramic center-spread called "before and after" of the Gulf coast (Holly Beach). It focussed on the devastating power of the hurricane as well as on the Lower Ninth Ward which, according to caption, "remained a scene of apocalypse and a reflection of lives thrown into chaos" even six month after "Katrina splintered the modest houses and wrecked the cars." What the *Times-Picayune* (Sept 1, p.15) sums up by: "Unbelievable debris, unbearable sadness, unrelenting need for water are among the things Hurricane Katrina deposited in Gulfport, Miss." The caption points explicitly at the rhetorical figure used in the images: the debris represent what cannot be represented, the deep, long term consequences of a disaster. How does one show broken lives, except metaphorically by showing the broken objects of those lives? Then come antidotes: the reconstruction of communities beyond the broken houses: a broken house should not mean a broken home.

The most powerful *locus* is undoubtedly the home. It draws its evocative power from its imaginary place in society but also from the fact that it plays both the role of metaphor (broken house means broken life) and metonymy (the house as container of people). Often the roof (the synecdoque of house and home) was the only road to salvation. But most of the time it is the intimate, the personal, the cherished, and of course the "duly and difficulty earned" that is washed away by the catastrophe. It is tainted by the waters, and images of return (appearing as early as September 6 in the *Times-Picayune*) are sometimes treated in a hopeful way ("life's back and we're going to fight") but most often in an elegiac mood as in the report *National Geographic* made for Katrina's first anniversary.<sup>35</sup> Almost premonitorily, in its August 2005 edition, *National Geographic* had published a

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<sup>34</sup> See also the shoe (*Times-Picayune*, Sept 11, p.2), the Mardi-gras mask (*Times-Picayune*, Sept 10, p.9) or the old people's home (*Times-Picayune*, Sept 15, p.9).

<sup>35</sup> For *Times-Picayune* images of return see issues of Sept 6 ["Coming home" on the front cover], 11, 13 ["Broken dreams"], 14 ["Picking up, cleaning up"], 17 ["Facing the aftermath"], 18 (p.20), 19 (p.15), but also the September 15 cover showing a woman and her dog amid her scant possession with the following headline : "the bill comes due", pointing at insurance problems. In its September 1 issue, the *Times-Picayune* writes "Homeowners get first glimpse of devastation on North Shore" (p.13) showing a picture of a tent and 3 refugees seen on the foreground (seen from behind they are visually anonymous, although they are identified in the caption) and the scene of devastation with two houses perfectly intact.

striking (and rhetorically perfect) picture of the effects of hurricanes in Florida on a young middle class girl of 19, whose life has been “erased” by hurricane Ivan [Picture 4]. In its August 2006 issue *National Geographic* features two images of disaster, combining most of the elements used in the rhetoric of loss. One is that of a child’s suit and shirt stained with mud and mold and the other of a closet in much the same state of disrepair [Picture 5]. These are the closest metaphorical representations of death one can come to, all the more poignant as they use the image of the child, a figure of helplessness and innocence.

The bulk of the representation of suffering, however, is borne by faces, preferably of women, children, and elderly people. This old rhetorical choice goes back to the early days of use of photography in social reform and was greatly developed by Farm Security Administration photographers. It draws on classic Christian iconography as shown by Alan Sekula.<sup>36</sup> Most of the time Katrina victims are seen from above, shot with a wide angle, increasing the effect of being crushed by events, or even their faces hidden in their hands. One exception is the image of the evacuation of one handicapped girl and an elderly man from the Super Dome published in the *Times-Picayune* of September 1 (p.14) deliberately taken at a low angle probably more as a way of contextualizing the evacuation (to show the Dome in the background) than as way of magnifying the subjects. Although they are now identified by name to conform with modern journalistic convention, as opposed to early 20th century fashion which identified people by class or type, the effect on viewers remain the same. The face is supposed to tell the story, and the individual expression becomes the expression of a whole class of people. As Lange’s California pea picker was THE Migrant (Mother) and embodied the plight of migrants, certain faces became the faces of Katrina, especially because they were used by magazines on their covers and inside pages.<sup>37</sup>

Aimed at audiences living outside the area of the catastrophe, and which for the most part were international in scope, news weeklies played their tune of borderless double-page spreads, punctuated with the small set of phrases used in such circumstances such as “tragedy”, “how did it happen?”, and “rebuilding a dream”.<sup>38</sup> As there are relatively few images in each issue, they are turned into emblems, using simple symbols as well as the reservoir of figures constructed over time by the report of disasters. Among those is the classic image of the Madonna (Virgin Mary with child, secularized as “mother-with-child”) as seen in *Time* magazine with its opening image [Picture 6], or *Paris-Match* using the same image for its cover or inside (September 8-14 issue), or a similar one in *Newsweek* (cover

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<sup>36</sup> Alan Sekula, “On the Invention of Photographic Meaning,” *Thinking Photography*, ed. by Victor Burgin (London: Macmillan, 1982), p.106-7.

<sup>37</sup> See Kempf, “L’Œuvre photographique de la ‘Farm Security Administration’,” Stange, *Symbols of Ideal Life*, and Vicki Goldberg, *The Power of Photography: How Photographs Changed Our Lives*, (New York: Abbeville Press, 1993), p.135ff, “Icons”.

<sup>38</sup> *Time*, September 12, 2005 issue. The same titles can be found in almost all catastrophes, such as Haiti, the Indonesian tsunami, etc.

of September 12 issue). Variations on the theme were used by *Newsweek* for the cover of its second Katrina edition (September 19) showing an extreme close up of a black child crying (cover of September 19 issue)<sup>39</sup>; *Time* with the close up of a young man crying comforted by an unidentified woman, a paradoxical image as men don't cry<sup>40</sup>; and in an almost unique front-page, the *Times-Picayune* of September 2, with Angela Perkins screaming "Help us, please !" [Picture 7].<sup>41</sup> The elderly were used as well, particularly in one instance, by *Paris-Match* and *Newsweek* in a criticism of the reaction of the Federal government towards the population, by showing an elderly woman draped in an American flag with the following captions: "America's flag at half-mast" ("L'Amérique en berne," *Paris-Match*, September 8-14) and "The Other America," *Newsweek*, (September 19).

### Action

The rescue actions were chronicled alongside another type of action – which came to be as much publicized as the rescue – the policing, and even the militarizing of New Orleans. The connection between those two aspects of the "intervention" can be seen with the army helicopters and trucks, half-military, half-humanitarian. A largely Black New Orleans was shown as an overseas theater of operation, one more zone where American forces projected themselves to implement the *pax americana*, but hardly as a part of the national territory.

Police officers and other officials were first presented as saviors of lives, as on the front page of the *Times-Picayune* on August 30, where two heavily equipped policemen save an elderly man from drowning in his own house.<sup>42</sup> Helmets, boots, radios, high visibility vests are the emblems of this job, boats are lifelines. Then came the medical aspects of rescue – with a few scenes seemingly drawn from *ER* slowly turning into Third World infirmary as help did not arrive. On the fifth day help came at last, and it did from the sky with big choppers – the staple of rescue technology since the Korean War – and heavy army technology. But then the action completely changed meaning, or to put it visually the scene moved from *M\*A\*S\*H* and *ER* to *24 hours*. Special forces in full gear, coming out the well established iconography of action movies and series and from the war in Afghanistan or Iraq, or post 9/11 scenes, descended on the city.<sup>43</sup> This made New Orleans the first part of the American territory to be thus invaded by Homeland security forces, treating the civilian population as (potential) enemy aliens and Louisiana as non-US territory [Picture 8]. The political effect of action visuals was ambiguous at best, at worst clearly negative for the Federal government. The

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<sup>39</sup> This image in many way resembles other famous "documentary pictures dealing with war". See a variation on the theme with *Air Raid Victim* (*Life* cover, 23 September 1940)

<sup>40</sup> *Time*, September 12.

<sup>41</sup> The *Times-Picayune* rarely uses close ups or individuals for its front page, and here joins picture and sound with a semiotically open image: is this woman dancing ? singing ? crying ? shouting ?

<sup>42</sup> See for instance the rescue scene in *Times-Picayune*, August 31, p.2.

<sup>43</sup> *Times-Picayune*, Sept 2, p.11, Sept 5, p.4, Sept 8, p.2 "Civic minded gunmen patrol Algiers." *Times-Picayune*, Sept 10, cover for instance looks like a Vietnam or *M\*A\*S\*H* scene.

watershed seemed to take place on September 8, when mandatory evacuation was decided and made the front page of the *Times-Picayune* in extremely clear words: "Clear out or else" with a picture of a Black Hawk helicopter hovering above a black man paddling home in the opposite direction, transforming the search-and-rescue mission into search-and-destroy missions [Picture 9].

Lastly, in disaster communication, one of the major figures of action alongside active rescuers are the iconic figures of politicians, high officials or even stars visiting disaster areas.<sup>44</sup> They appear on the scene, or its whereabouts, to signal that society and its solidarity functions are present. 9/11 was a catastrophe of a different nature, which obviously called for a prominent visual place for the commander-in-chief.<sup>45</sup> But since the trope of war was established by F.D. Roosevelt in his first inaugural address, the President of the US and to some extent governors have clearly established the link between economic/social/political problems and natural disasters. All come under the Chief Executive's remit, and emergency action to protect or relieve American citizens is part and parcel of his duty.

In both local and national/international coverage, George W. Bush was prominently invisible as it were. The first image of him is "out-of-scene" and hardly shows his face, the second one is of Marine One (the President's helicopter) flying low over New Orleans, the third one of a meeting with firefighters and a dog that was saved from the rubble on September 12, and when finally G.W. Bush makes it front page [Picture 10] the portrayal is rather terrible for him, as well as for politicians in general as one cannot avoid reading the image metaphorically: they duck to avoid a low hanging wire; Governor Blanco and Mayor Nagin look terrified while President Bush almost disappears in the command car (only General Honoré seems unimpressed). They literally duck and cover. As to the President all his representations show a conspicuous distance and a greater interest in dogs and firefighters than in victims. *Newsweek* and *Time* the President visually in the same way, even though their editorial line are different: one picture of George Bush and his relief team at work for *Time* but with the headline "Broke down", the same image being used by *Newsweek* with a much tighter cropping.<sup>46</sup> *Time* also shows the President during a Cabinet meeting, choosing a slightly formal and "vintage" black-and-white rendition to illustrate the theme of the article: "Living too much in a bubble?"<sup>47</sup> In any case, this is quite a long shot from the 9/11 imagery when a fighting Bush was standing on top of the rubble, with the rescuers, encouraging them as a 19th century general in the midst of battle.<sup>48</sup>

As to Governor Blanco, she is seen on the verge of a nervous breakdown, so tired that she leans on the President for support [Picture 11], a rather interesting

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<sup>44</sup> This made the Haiti earthquake very special as country and UN officials were themselves victims, and one of its most famous images was that of a completely destroyed presidential palace.

<sup>45</sup> *Time*, cover of September 24, 2001 and pp. 46-47.

<sup>46</sup> *Time*, September 19, 2005; *Newsweek*, September 19, 2005.

<sup>47</sup> *Time*, September 19, 2005, pp. 34-35.

<sup>48</sup> *Time*, September 24, 2001.



image as their relationship was less than good. Despite the actual coverage given in articles, Katrina appears *visually* as the demise of politicians and as a collapse of civil and political society and ultimately of democracy in its protective function. Faced with elemental forces, people seem abandoned in the city after the first evacuation, only able to count on their own strength and on others as affected as themselves. Pictures describe the emergence of this person-to-person solidarity, of community building amongst the ruins, reenacting the origins of the peopling of the nation. The description of the killer wind, followed by the inexorable flood and eventually the vengeful fires (*Times-Picayune*, September 7) as well as “diseases” point at a mythical reading of the catastrophe, a scourge, a plague, mobilizing the four elements. One *Time* double page even connects it to the burning of Atlanta, a deeply engrained mythical holocaust in Southern consciousness [Picture 12]. One does not even have to subscribe to extreme interpretations of the causes<sup>49</sup> to see the catastrophe portrayed as an American myth: the *Times-Picayune* image announcing the fires and diseases on September 7 is a Christ-like figure (wearing a visible gold cross on his chest) walking out of a primeaval fog [Picture 13]. In other words, by obliterating civilization and creating a complete disruption in the traditional taken-for-granted systems, Katrina threw New Orleans back into a state of lawlessness characteristic of Frontier days, those of a “generic” Frontier, of certain parts of the western mid-west and the Rockies, with guns in the streets and mud everywhere.<sup>50</sup> In such historical/mythical reading, the refugees in the Super Dome, or in other relief centers, could then be compared to those huddled masses, the refuse of the teeming shores of massive 19th immigration, images revived in recent years by the pictures of Mexican immigrants trying to cross the border bridging all geographical and chronological gaps. In fact what was at stake in this visual confusion was a strangely contradictory message: on the one hand a form of ontogenesis of America (as if each generation had to make the experience of the founding of the Nation again), on the other hand the visual demonstration that New Orleans – and more generally Louisiana – citizens were aliens.

### Explanations: science and politics

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<sup>49</sup> A pro-life group named “Columbia Christians for Life” seems to have issued a press release comparing the shape of the hurricane seen from space to that of an unborn foetus. See <http://www.dailykos.com/story/2005/8/31/0836/62623>. I could not find any trace of the original claim on this group’s website. The information seems to have been sent by e-mail, and as I am not aware of any public disclaimer I assume this piece of information is reliable. Mayor Nagin also implied that Katrina was a “payback from God” for the invasion of Iraq and for Black infighting (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/01/16/AR2006011600925.html>). On the negative image of the city see Randy Sparks, “American Sodom: New Orleans Faces Its Critics and an Uncertain Future”, *Nuevo Mundo Mundos Nuevos, Coloquios*, 2007, [Online], Put online on May 8, 2007. URL : <http://nuevomundo.revues.org/3941> and his contribution in the present volume.

<sup>50</sup> *Times-Picayune* photographer Ted Jackson says it in so many words: “we lived in a frontier town now,” and concludes “hard times call for strong people” (part 4 of his interview). *Time* (September 19 issue) titles the image of a corpse floating near an Interstate underpass : “Ghost Town.”

Direct human responsibilities in this “natural” catastrophe were pointed at by three types of publications. Those with a more liberal leaning – *Newsweek* for instance which devoted its second Katrina issue to the race factor while *Time* simply saw a “system failure”<sup>51</sup> –, those with an environmentalist agenda – *National Geographic* and to some extent *Time* which titled its third Katrina issue on the human impact on hurricane strength –, and foreign newspapers and magazines which emphasized the failure of George W. Bush in dealing with domestic problems as well, but more generally with the well-known simile of the “giant with clay feet,” pointed at America’s failure to protect its own citizen and at the unfair nature of American society.<sup>52</sup>

The environmentalist approach brings no surprise and concentrates mostly on space views of the hurricane and the maelstrom effect, with its massive otherworldly white texture remindful of super novae or the surface of Jupiter. *Time* chose a different metaphor – and a clever lay-out – transforming the image of a wave into that of a hurricane (with its rotating pattern) contaminating the reader’s space by jumping out of the frame as it were and eating part of the title of the magazine.<sup>53</sup>

One of the charges made was the unequal toll of this natural disaster on residents according to their color and social class. Of course coverage by the *Times-Picayune* is much more varied as it published many more images over the period, and much more information than editorializing as its readers were those directly affected by the event. The second issue of *Newsweek* on the topic (September 19) editorialized the race factor by placing it on its cover: “Poverty, Race and Katrina. The lessons of a National Shame.” The choice of cover images by *Newsweek* made explicit references to wars and disasters in developing countries (September 12 and 19 issues). The visual effect, however, was two-sided. While the large visible presence of African Americans was a mere translation of a demographic fact, their visibility made this *American* disaster a *Black* disaster, thus racializing the issue in an almost mechanical way.

For someone with no specific knowledge of New Orleans, however, it is difficult by looking both at the coverage and the published images to see a clear racial bias one way or another.<sup>54</sup> The images from the Super Dome were of blacks because there was a majority of black people there, and if most of the rescuers in

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<sup>51</sup> Cover of September 19 issue.

<sup>52</sup> See *Newsweek*’s review of the foreign press: “The wonderful world of Oz” (September 19, 2005, p.17).

<sup>53</sup> *Time*, October 3, 2005. I will not deal here in detail with the use of infographics and other visual representations including scientific images (usually of weather conditions) which are now commonly used by the media to complement their pictures and text. They carry all the authority of science – power but also mystery and distance from the object. One good example is the reduplication of a before-after (Hurricane Ivan) picture set by a totally redundant computer analysis of the texture of the earth surface, whose function is less to explain than to assert the idea of a scientific analysis of those phenomena (what Barthes would have called a sign of “science-ness”) *National Geographic*, August 2005.

<sup>54</sup> Statistics in “What Katrina revealed”.

the pictures were whites and most of the rescued blacks, it was a simple translation of a demographic fact. The French magazine *Paris-Match* while acknowledging the fact (most of its images are of black people) ends with a personal portrait of a white woman and her two children in Biloxi (where is the kids' father? the paper does not say although the caption reads, rather vaguely "Black or white, those who suffered most were the poor") thus drawing a rather French conclusion on an American situation: the real fracture line is social not racial.

*Paris-Match* is a good example of the indictment of the US for the way it treats its population (it happens to be one of the most thorough and to-the-point coverage of the various terrible facets of the storm despite its sometimes grandiloquent style). This is not really done, however, through the choice of images, which is strikingly similar to that of *Time* magazine. It is rather in its editorial playing on strong visual symbols and catchy headlines directly referring to other disasters – as well as to Biblical scenes and iconology, with Apocalypse in their background.<sup>55</sup> Unsurprisingly the main references are to the popular knowledge of the Civil War and the end of the South ("Autant en emporte le cyclone" ["Gone with the Hurricane"], the burning of Atlanta already mentionned<sup>56</sup>), the trope of war ("the airport is turned into a field hospital and some have already boarded for the other world"), classical and religious allusions (to Brughel's *The Blind* and the biblical tale of the blind leading the blind [Picture 14]), as well as other recent disasters ("Mississippi Tsunami") and national imagery with "American flag at half mast" collocating an old black woman and the American flag [Picture 15]. Clearly for *Paris-Match*, America is sinking. To make its point, *Paris-Match* published a picture by Ben Sklar (a University of Texas journalism student) of a SUV being used as a high ground by a group of black and white people, men, women and children. The children wear life vests (the sign that they have received some help already, or ... own a boat). The composition is clearly that a microcosm of (American) society, a sort of Noah's Arch under flood rains (although we learn from the caption that the white people are the rescuers helping out a black family). But while *Paris Match* chose to see the sinking of the first world power, *Newsweek*, which used the same image, titled it "High water heroics" and told the readers that "this family was saved ..."<sup>57</sup>

The most impressive difference between French and American newsmagazines is to be seen when they deal with law-and-order approach, clearly indicted by *Paris-Match* with the image of a State police armored vehicle with several heavily armed policemen oblivious to two Black women asking for help [Picture 16]: "the only response: the army" and "they expected food, they got tanks"; or with a scene of arrest titled: "military before humanitarian." Clearly the US is but another

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<sup>55</sup> *L'Express* (September 5, 2005) did the same with a photograph reminiscent of those of 1930s farmers, titled "The Grapes of Misery."

<sup>56</sup> *Paris-Match*, September 8-14.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.* et *Newsweek*, September 12, p.22.

corrupt African State, or even more directly, it's treating Louisiana as another Afghanistan or Iraq.<sup>58</sup>

### The limits of the visible

The last point I would like to address is one that all catastrophes raise for photographers (and editors), ie the limit of propriety, or to put it simply, what can be shown of the horror. Katrina was a life-and-death situation and one where bodies turned up frequently. The actual issue at stake is not the representation of death in photographs. Dead bodies were one of the first topics of photography.<sup>59</sup> Very common in 19th century culture, the actual photos of corpses disappeared afterwards and despite the heavy photo coverage of the 20th century wars and growing graphic violence in moving pictures, they were always used with great care in the media. The limit which is generally admitted is that the body should not be maimed or otherwise damaged by decomposition (the question of the wholeness of the envelope is more than a matter of taste; it is metaphysical as what constitutes humanity is the preservation of the sacredness of the outward envelope<sup>60</sup>), the individual should not be recognized so as to keep it in its function as "an idea of corpse" or as a metonymy of "death" (the respect for the deceased and his family being merely a convenient convention).<sup>61</sup> The "ideal position" for

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<sup>58</sup> A predictable incident took place around two captions made by different agencies, one of a young black man carrying a bag and described as "looting", and that of a white couple carrying bags and described as "finding food."  
[<http://www.nytimes.com/2005/09/05/business/05caption.html?ex=1283572800&en=340529d0729a0b63&ei=5090>] Although the debate was inconclusive the question of the characterization of actions in those emergency situations was paramount as *Paris-Match* asked: "looting begins, out of necessity or in order to steal?" displaying the image of two ordinary black women being held at gunpoint by the police like dangerous criminals (one of them opens her arms in complete abandonment) in a scene reminiscent of many TV series but also showing the absurd brutality of police action. Similarly one may note that one of the Black persons on the image is described as "a Jazz musician, member of a gang."

<sup>59</sup> Jay Ruby, *Secure the Shadow: Death and Photography in America* (Boston: MIT Press, 1995). Simon Watney, "Photography and AIDS" in *The Critical Image*. Golberg, *The Power of Photographs*, passim. Little has been written about photographs of death after the fashion of deathbed scenes passed. Ruby's study focuses on burial scenes and memorial images. Susie Linfield's *The Cruel Radiance: Photography and Political Violence* (University of Chicago Press, 2010) partially fills the gap by looking at photojournalism. As to pictures of suffering, and of the dead as well, Susan Sontag's *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003) is a thought-provoking essay albeit not a study of the practice of showing and looking at such images.

<sup>60</sup> The only possibility, in the case of a half-buried body – because of collapse, earthquake – is to show a hand or an arm sticking out of the rubble. It is used in staged (art) photographs.

<sup>61</sup> Portraits of death, especially of violent death, now seem to violate propriety. It is not surprising that an artist such as Andres Serrano who is famous for his tackling taboos as to what can be shown (urine, faeces, religious desecration) made a series of morgue portraits of people who died violent deaths as well as of people with extended burns as if there were classic portraits. The instantaneous and recording power of photography has also been used to catch the "very moment of death": the famous stolen picture of a woman's execution on the electric chair, Robert Capa's dead Republican soldier, JFK's assassination, Lee Oswald's and Bob Kennedy's or the execution of a Vietcong by

violent death, if I may say so, being laying prone as the face is invisible.<sup>62</sup> Supine position, used during the Civil War and in post-mortem photography, connotes peacefulness and rest.<sup>63</sup> In the case of Katrina, the very few bodies photographed and the even fewer shown, were all in prone position, floating on the water, or under a sheet. Some old people were shown just before dying (according to the captions), and one man was shown dead in his wheelchair. All were shot from a certain distance, the one exception being the *Time* double page displaying a corpse in the foreground [Picture 17]. As to the most gruseome reality of death in New Orleans, it is only shown on a website, with a warning that the image contains “graphic material” with the prone body of a young boy and a dog said to “feed on corpses”. None of this is visible, though, and the image bears all the above mandatory quality (integrity, distance, anonymity). Not surprisingly the local press (*Times-Picayune*) showed very few corpses, and when they did, they were covered so as to be anonymous (*Times-Picayune*, September 6), the friends and relatives of the deceased being among the potential readers/viewers.

#### A temporary conclusion

Photographs published in the immediate aftermath of the hurricane and the ensuing flood are clearly marked by their “classicism.” When dealing with catastrophies, photographers and picture editors tend to rely on a small number of identifiable rhetorical figures which have defined this type of reporting since the 1930s.

One feature, however, makes Katrina’s coverage stand out. Whatever the editorial stance of the publication (liberal, conservative) and its positioning (local, national, international), the photographs of Katrina’s aftermath display a high level of ambiguity, as evidence of the complexity of the actual situation of the city both in its history and after this latest major disaster. The ambiguity I am referring to is that between an apparent return to the (Frontier) origin of the nation, mythologically transforming the perennial climatic ordeal of the South into a perennial rebirth and rejuvenation; and the image of a city whose population appears as fundamentally alien. Such duality of vision if it does not explain the reality behind this image – and the present volume shows it is far from monolithic – is one more piece of evidence of the slow evolution of *cultural* features as well as of *visual* culture.

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Saigon’s police chief). A reflection on the body in the context of death and representation can be found in S. Paige Baty, *American Monroe: The Making of a Body Politic* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

<sup>62</sup> See George Strock, “[Dead soldiers], Buna Beach New Guinea,” February 1943 (first published in September 1943).

<sup>63</sup> See the moving of dead soldiers during the Civil war analyzed by William A. Frassanito, in *Gettysburg: A Journey in Time* (New York: Scribner, 1975).

## A note on methodology and sources

### 1. Research on Katrina and its representation

Little has been written on the subject, especially compared with the large body of research on the images of 9/11 seen as a media event. One article, however, does a thorough job of analyzing how the pool of images from the wire services were used, selected, winnowed down by editors.<sup>64</sup> Its comprehensive corpus and very rigorous analytical method lead to remarkably unsurprising conclusions, but the amount of material covered help us see a little clearer in the vast amount of available items. The authors conclude that newspapers focused mostly on victims (despite the majority of photographs of officials and of pseudo-events sent by the wire services) and showed “non-white citizens as the primary victims of the storm” (556). Documentary photographs, however, which most often take as subject matter the “suffering of others,” have led to considerable amounts of research. Some of it was used, when deemed necessary in this study. I relied on the research I did on the social and political rhetoric of FSA images, complemented by some specific analyses of the same corpora which cast a light on certain important aspects of what remains a central exemplum in the history of photography and of American democracy.<sup>65</sup>

### 2. Corpus

This analysis is limited to the first two weeks after the landfall of Katrina (August 29, 2005), and to the city of New Orleans for two reasons. 1) I was interested in the perception of the catastrophe “as such” and the national and international attention was maximum at this period. The aftermath is often only dealt with in the more local papers, with one exception, *National Geographic*. It was also the period when the event itself was formed. All reconstruction periods look more or less the same from a structural perspective; the issues shift from technical to political, with a mixture of hope and despair, often describing the speed of the process – or absence thereof. 2) Many images were made in New Orleans which soon became the real focus of media attention because of the specific problem of the dykes and consequent flooding.<sup>66</sup> Also, the existence of a quality newspaper covering it (*The Times-Picayune*) made it particularly interesting. I have not dealt with post-Katrina photographs of the kind exhibited in New Orleans in 2010 (“Katrina +5”) based on before/after photographs – a practice which has now become common since the *Rephotographic Survey*

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<sup>64</sup> Fahmy, Shahira, James D Kelly, et Yung Soo Kim. “What Katrina revealed: A visual analysis of the Hurricane coverage by news wires and US newspapers.” *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 84, n° 3 (FAL 2007): 546-561.

<sup>65</sup> See Kempf, “L’Œuvre photographique de la ‘Farm Security Administration’”, Stange, *Symbols of Ideal Lif*, Landis, “Fate, Responsibility, and ‘Natural’ Disaster Relief.

<sup>66</sup> “What Katrina revealed”, p.11.

*Project* – nor will I analyse other “creative projects” which developed from and around the event.<sup>67</sup>

### 3. Method

I have not conducted any number crunching here and the study relies entirely on a careful *qualitative* analysis of the corpus. A long habit of dealing with large corpora has taught me that there is no statistical fact that a trained observer could not perceive. Furthermore the experience of looking over and over again at those images recreates experimentally the “real” conditions of perception in a better way than numerical constructs and thus may be said to go beyond “anecdotal evidence.”

### 4. Frame/s of reference

Despite its title, this research is not located within the field of “trauma studies.” Whatever the specificities and traumatic nature of Katrina, it is after all only one event in the history of the United States, no more but no less either, and I intended to see it as part of a broader narrative. Trauma studies tend to abstract and essentialize events in the way they construct and separate them from the flux of events.

One issue in particular which remained outside my inquiry was the purported link between death and photographs, an ontological speculation much developed by authors and commentators.<sup>68</sup> My purpose was to deal with the actual social usage of images, which does imply rhetorics and imagination but makes no statement as to the *noumenon* of photographs. In other words I have dealt with *photographs* more than with *photography*.<sup>69</sup>

In the chosen corpora, the question of the ultimate function of the image is rather obvious. Those are public press images and their function is clearly defined by the medium itself, as opposed to documentary or publicity images – and of course artistic images – whose status is much more ambiguous and varied.

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<sup>67</sup> For the post-Katrina photo exhibit see

[http://www.nola.com/hurricane/index.ssf/2010/05/hurricane\\_katrina\\_photo\\_exhibi.html](http://www.nola.com/hurricane/index.ssf/2010/05/hurricane_katrina_photo_exhibi.html) and [http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/14289460/ns/news-picture\\_stories/displaymode/1107/s/2/](http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/14289460/ns/news-picture_stories/displaymode/1107/s/2/). Mark Klett & alii, *Second View. The Rephotographic Survey Project* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1984).

<sup>68</sup> Although Roland Barthes did not invent it, his *Camera Lucida* (1980) remains one of the most cogent – albeit compact – exposition of the doctrine.

<sup>69</sup> For a good historical presentation of this issue, see Vicki Goldberg, *The Power of Photography. How photographs changed our lives* (Abbeville Press, 1993), and Mary Warner Marien, *Photography. A Cultural History* (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2002).